REMBRANDT'S 1648 SUPPER AT EMMAUS

I spent the past two and a half weeks at a beach in Delaware recovering from a bicycle crash. With my body largely useless for anything else, I read. Someone had left Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus in the place where I was staying. It was a large catalogue – replete with pictures and essays – of a current exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The book's frontispiece is Rembrandt's 1648 Supper at Emmaus. I had seen the painting before. I had also noticed that the face of Jesus in it looks unconventional -- more human, if you will, than countless other representations of Jesus' face in paintings of this same scene. But I had not thought much about that fact. I simply saw it as an instance of Rembrandt bringing his famous portrait painting skills to bear on a religious theme.

Reading the book, I learned that I was wrong about that. In Rembrandt's Amsterdam, a painter who deviated from canonical representations of Jesus risked incurring the wrath of the public. This was a militantly protestant society, profoundly suspicious of human images of divinity. The latter were thought to violate Mosaic prohibitions against idolatry. During the 1500's, for example, protestant aversion to such images rose to a level of intolerance that expressed itself in massive destructions of religious art.

Adherence to traditional iconography escaped the charge of idolatry because it involved replicating images of Jesus that were not considered man-made. One was the Sudarium (or Veil of Veronica), the other, the Mandylion of Edessa. Both were cloths that Jesus had allegedly pressed to his face and left his image on. Because that image was created by God himself, so to speak, reproducing it in its essentials was therefore not seen as an idolatrous trespass.

In other words, Rembrandt painting in the Netherlands in the 1640's and 50's was not Caravaggio painting in Catholic Italy fifty years earlier. The latter could count on getting away with a Supper at Emmaus, painted in 1601, that also features a rather unconventional-looking Jesus. For Rembrandt, producing that sort of painting in his own societal setting involved a real risk of offending his public's religious sensibilities.

The exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum (which I subsequently went to see) documents the lengths to which Rembrandt went in preparing his controversial portrayal of Jesus. It focuses on eight small panels he painted during that period, not for public consumption, but as studies. Each features an expressive face -- the same one in all cases. It belonged, apparently, to a youngish male Jew in Amsterdam whom Rembrandt used as a model for this purpose. That these panels were intended as faces of Jesus becomes apparent when the face depicted in them appears in Rembrandt's other works as the face of Jesus. The 1648 Supper at Emmaus is the most prominent example. The same face appears in Rembrandt's Hundred Guilder Print, a famous etching that depicts Jesus preaching to a large crowd.

Quite apart from the general risks involved in unconventional representations of Jesus, the panels are remarkable for a number of reasons. One is that Rembrandt's Jesus is a physically humble man. He has a low forehead, coarse, dark hair, high cheekbones, strong features, and a face more aptly described as broad than as long. That depiction of him is conspicuously at odds with the then current religious iconography that represented Jesus as physically imposing: high forehead, longish face, somewhat subdued classical features, fine blondish hair. As already suggested, that image of Jesus's face was based on sacred icons. But as Rembrandt paints it in the mid-sixteen hundreds, there is nothing
traditional or physically imposing about Jesus’ face at all.

Because he used a Jewish young man as his model, one may suppose that Rembrandt simply set out to set the ethnic record straight. After all, the historic Jesus was a Jew. But considering the risks of public opprobrium that Rembrandt took, it seems rather implausible to think that he would have considered them worth taking for so trivial a purpose. More importantly, it is not clear at all that Jesus being a Jew had to mean that he looked physically humble.

So what was Rembrandt up to? His religious paintings prior to that time generally adhered to the traditional representation of Jesus. The most obvious examples are his depictions, in 1630 and 1632, of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Even some of his later works, such as the painting *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (1644), or his 1654 etching entitled *Christ at Emmaus (Larger Plate)*, depict a conventional Jesus. But at some point in the 1640's, the issue apparently gets the better of him and he starts exercising himself about it. He paints those startling eight panels. Why?

Some of the essays in *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus* suggest that another change occurs in painter’s religious works at this time. They become quieter and more contemplative. Whereas *The Raising of Lazarus* of 1630, and of 1632, for example, emphasize dramatic action, a later (1642) etching of that same scene is considerably more subdued. To be sure, the occurrence of a miracle is depicted in all three cases. But in the 1642 version, except for the astonishment of some of the onlookers, its occurrence is a quiet event. Jesus does not gesture dramatically or commandingly. He just stands there quietly with his left arm slightly extended in what looks like a beckoning gesture. He does not radiate light. There is no aura, no halo. Apparently, his presence suffices all by itself.

The change is undeniable. But what explains it?

It seems to me that a thoughtful artist who paints Jesus in all these Gospel settings must eventually ask himself what Jesus had going for him that explains his effect on people during the time he lived. That Jesus was the Son of God is a useless answer to that question. Even if one takes that to be a fact, how does one represent it visually? Lots of people in Jesus' time did not see his divinity. On the contrary, his presence and his preaching put them off. It aroused enough anger to cause his being put to death. Yet in other people Jesus inspired intense devotion. What did some people see that others did not?

Painting a Jesus who radiates light or wears a halo does not really answer the question either. Apparently some people saw that light and others didn't. In *The Hundred Guilder Print* (1649), for example, Rembrandt presents Jesus radiating light, but the Pharisees on the far left do not see it. Absorbed in their own conversation, they are not even listening to what he is saying. To some in his audience, Jesus' speech had a compelling ring of truth. But others apparently failed to discern that ring.

Quite possibly, this is not a question that painting can answer. But Rembrandt apparently thought that it could, or that it had to. After all, people's experience of the historical Jesus was essentially visual. To be sure, it was also auditory, but that fact raises the same issue. What accounts for the difference between recognizing the truth when one hears it and not recognizing it? Just so, what explains the difference in the visual impact that Jesus' presence had on some people but not on others?

Although his depictions of Jesus' face on the eight panels (the so-called “Heads of Christ”) show it as physically humble, Rembrandt endows that face with an oddly compelling humanity. It is an open, honest, gentle face, wearing a look at once questioning and contemplative, and with eyes that see the world as it is. All the same, Rembrandt wants to say, what you see in this face depends on what you
bring to it. If its benign expression offends you, for example, because you see it as morally aggressive, the face will not impress you. And it would not have impressed you even in Jesus' time by virtue of being his, whatever he may actually have looked like.

It seems to me that that is Rembrandt's point in the 1648 *Supper at Emmaus*.

Painting the supper at Emmaus presents a painter with a tough pictorial problem from the start.

According to the Gospel story, on their way to Emmaus three days after Jesus' death, two of his disciples meet a stranger. He happens to be the risen Christ, but they don't recognize him. They engage him in conversation, like what he says, and invite him to join them for dinner. As they are seated around the table, he breaks the bread in the traditional way. They recognize him in a flash, at which point he vanishes.

If you are going to paint this scene at the moment when recognition sets in, how do you represent Jesus? According to the story, he is a stranger morphing, so to speak, into someone they know.

If you are Caravaggio in 1601, you paint Jesus as a stranger, as a man, that is, whose features do not match any canonical image of Jesus. And you try to tell the story by going out of your way in portraying the dramatic astonishment of the two disciples. Unfortunately, but for the title of the painting, this renders visually incomprehensible what they are astonished by. Apparently Caravaggio himself was somewhat dissatisfied with this result. In 1606, he makes another attempt at painting the scene, this time with an entirely canonical, recognizable Jesus. That does not quite work either, since it renders incomprehensible how the disciples could have failed to recognize their master in the first place.

The same may be said about any number of such paintings by others all of whom opt for Caravaggio's 1606 solution. All feature an unmistakable Jesus, halo and all. So what was there to recognize that was not obvious? They all leave that question unanswered.

It is possible to tell a complex story here. Because the disciples thought that Jesus was dead and did not believe in his resurrection, they did not initially recognize him even though he was the same man. The possibility was simply not within their contemplation. This is somewhat at odds with the Gospel story, according to which Jesus deliberately changed his appearance. In any case, however, there does not seem to be a way of painting the psychological phenomenon of not seeing what is before one's eyes because one does not believe that it could possibly be there. If that is so, then it is silly to hold it against people that they are unable to paint it. All that one may hold against them is that they are trying to do so.

To be fair to Caravaggio, like the waiter in Rembrandt's painting, the one in his of 1601 is portrayed as unaware of what is going on, this despite the fact that he seems to be looking directly at Jesus while Rembrandt's waiter is not. One can interpret that as Caravaggio trying to convey that divinity, or its absence, are both in the eye of the beholder. Somewhat more positively, he could be saying that it takes faith to see. The disciples suddenly come into possession of that faith; the waiter does not. But the question is why. What explains the difference?

There is nothing in Caravaggio's painting that I can see that answers that question. And while one may take the view (on religious grounds) that it has no answers (since faith is a mysterious gift from God), I do not think that was Rembrandt's view. He seems to believe that there had to be something about Jesus
that inspired faith in some people. He finds it in Jesus' face when looked at with eyes unclouded by agendas of one sort or another. The disciples eventually recognized Jesus because they had learned from him to look at other people with such eyes. Like striving for purity of heart, doing so takes effort.

So what was there about Jesus' face? The question has no reliable historical answers. For Rembrandt, I think it becomes the question, “What must there have been?” His panels represent his answer: a compelling humanity discernible by anyone who had eyes to see. He works that answer into the 1648 Supper at Emmaus.

It is true that Rembrandt's Jesus in that painting wears a faint halo, but the waiter doesn't see it. Objectively speaking, it is not there to be seen. The emphasis is on Jesus' face, and, through it, on the person Rembrandt thinks Jesus was. That person was above all both palpably human and humane, kind, forgiving, and gentle – something of a miracle, as human beings go. That not everyone saw that in him at the time is less important, Rembrandt says, than whether you, the viewer, see it today. In any case, whether you do or not depends on how human, how gentle, how kind, how quiet you yourself are. It ultimately depends on how pure your heart is.

In other words, Rembrandt's 1648 Supper at Emmaus is not just a painting of a Gospel scene like so many others. It was the result of the painter's conversation with himself about the nature of faith as a fact of experience. For a Christian, the focus of faith is the person of Jesus. Rembrandt seems to suggest that what made that person special or, more importantly, recognizable as special, was not that he performed miracles and eventually rose from the dead, but that he had a pure heart and that this was obvious to anyone who came close to having such a heart himself or herself. It was obvious from the look on his face. If one did not see that, one was not likely to believe that he rose from the dead either.

So what actually happened at Emmaus? Rembrandt's painting leaves the viewer with that question. Indeed it addresses the question to him: what do you make of that exceedingly human Jesus? What would you have made of him in his time, when he had not yet been officially certified as divine? And does it really matter whether he rose from the dead when what he was that touched people is not a mortal thing in the first place?

These can be troubling, discomfiting questions. Unsurprisingly, the shift in religious iconography that Rembrandt tried to initiate did not outlive him.

As I already indicated, I traveled to Philadelphia a few days ago to see the exhibition itself. I recommend it, although I must say that it is more instructive if you read and work through its catalogue before you go.

(Including pictures of all the artwork mentioned above would have cluttered the piece. They are easy to find on the web.)

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